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6

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Food and Jewishness

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Why should one eat—or avoid—Jewish food? What makes food "Jewish" in the first place? These questions feature prominently not only in rabbinic and other Jewish texts but also in the classical sources of Christianity and Islam. The authors of these influential works disagree over what food to eat and, more fundamentally, over what Jewishness is, but they all agree that the difference between Jews and non-Jews matters. They also agree that food is an ideal medium through which to emphasize this distinction, even though the distinction itself is not really about food.[1]

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources from antiquity through the Middle Ages contain rules about not only the ingredients in one's food—pork, for example—but also the person who makes it and the people with whom one eats it. Laws that focus on food preparation and commensality (sharing meals) are especially important for understanding how religious authorities use food to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. For example, we have all experienced the power of informal norms about who you can or cannot eat with in cafeterias; these norms reinforce group identities and social hierarchies in powerful ways. Not long ago, Southern states had laws mandating racial segregation at lunch counters as a means of ensuring that no one would publicly violate color-based social norms.

Prohibitions against shared meals and restrictions on whose food one may eat powerfully convey the message that the divide between "Us" and "Them" ought not to be bridged. Not only that, antisocial behavior of this nature reinforces stereotyped ideas about who They are and, more important, who We are. Some American supporters of the 2003

Iraq War, for example, refused to eat food associated with the French because France opposed the war. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives even barred french fries from congressional cafeterias, replacing them with "freedom fries." The calorie count of the fries stayed the same, but those who insisted on avoiding "French" food recognized that rhetoric matters: only "freedom fries" bolster the kind of American identity that lends itself to support of regime change through military intervention.

The premodern legal traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam contain a variety of norms that promote self-segregation or abstention from food associated with adherents of foreign religions, although it is important to emphasize that adherence to these laws was inconsistent at best. If a rabbi, a priest, and a pair of imams walked into a cafeteria but insisted on following all these traditional restrictions, the result would be a very bad joke. The rabbi would order a salad, worrying not only about the ingredients in other menu items but also about the likelihood that the cooks are not Jewish. The priest, in contrast, would refuse the food if the cooks *are* Jewish and would refuse to eat with the rabbi in any case. The Shiʿi imam would order a salad and sit at his own table, concerned about the Jewish (or Christian) identity both of the cooks and of his dining companions. Only the Sunni imam could make the case for eating almost anything Jewish or Christian cooks prepared in accordance with their own traditions' norms, and he and the rabbi could at least share a table. Beyond the tragicomic outcome of this doomed effort to go out for lunch together, what is "funny" about this scenario is that all four of these clergy members are motivated in part by concerns regarding the Jewishness of their meal.

The rabbi in our imaginary cafeteria would order a salad in part because other foods on the menu might contain biblically prohibited ingredients (see chapter 1 for further details). Keeping kosher, in other words, is a way to express one's Jewishness, defined in this respect as adherence to the Torah's instructions. Biblical dietary laws, however, were not designed to segregate ancient Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish people, from their Canaanite neighbors: archeological evidence indicates that the Torah permits the vast majority of food consumed in the region.

The Torah does not aspire for Israelites to eat differently from their neighbors but rather, you might say, to eat similarly to God. Because kosher animals resemble animals fit for sacrifice in the Temple, those who keep kosher affirm their membership in what the Bible describes as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 9:6) that seeks to emulate and be close with God. More fundamentally, the Torah portrays the Israelite's act of distinguishing between permitted animals and other species as being similar in nature to the divine act of distinguishing between Israelites and other peoples (Leviticus 20:24–26). Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom put it this way: "As God has restricted his choice of the nations to Israel, so must Israel restrict its choice of edible animals to the few sanctioned by God."[2]

The practice of selecting and preparing one's meat in accordance with God's laws reinforces in Israelites a sense of distinctiveness, even if the choices Israelites make are not in fact different from those of their neighbors. Like Americans who insisted on eating freedom fries instead of french fries, Israelites ingested the same meat as their Canaanite neighbors but also internalized a particular way of viewing themselves and their world. By adhering to biblical dietary laws, Israelites affirmed their self-understanding as holy—that is, distinctive, set apart by God from all other peoples to live in a God-like manner.

Of course, Judaism of the Middle Ages and today is not the religion of the Bible, and that was already true more than two thousand years ago. Jewish practices, Jewish values, and the definition of Jewishness itself evolved as Jews absorbed new ideas from their ever-changing surroundings. A number of particularly significant changes occurred during the Hellenistic period, when Greeks ruled the Eastern Mediterranean.

Following the conquests of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, the Land of Israel became home to a large number of pork-loving Greeks. In this era, adherence to biblical dietary laws clearly marked Jews as different from the surrounding society. Even Jews who resisted assimilation, however, internalized many aspects of Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) thought and culture. So, for example, Jews in the Greek city of Alexandria interpreted biblical dietary laws in light of virtues promoted by Greek philosophers. Keeping kosher, these philosophically inclined Jews declared, keeps Jews morally upright by promoting virtues such as cleanliness and

righteousness while discouraging vices like violence and promiscuity. To paraphrase, by forbidding pork, the Torah prevents its adherents from acting like pigs. No rationale of this sort appears within biblical accounts of the dietary laws, which explain these rules in terms of holiness, not morality.

Another Hellenistic concept embraced by these Jews relates to the distinction between Us and Them. Greek thinkers divided the world into two groups—namely, Greeks and barbarians—and they largely ignored distinctions among foreigners. Jewish thinkers of this era also began to see the world in binary terms and to classify all non-Jews as "gentiles," plain and simple. Specifically Jewish food practices began to function as a means of distinguishing Jews from gentiles.

Hellenistic Jews used stories about food to express their ideas regarding the ideal relationship between being Jewish and interacting with the dominant Greek society. Biblical heroes from Abraham to Esther share meals with foreigners in a completely nonchalant fashion: the identity of the dining partners is simply irrelevant to the plot. In Alexandria, however, Jews told stories of heroes who insist on keeping kosher but nevertheless earn the respect of gentile kings. In the Letter of Aristeas and similar works, the act of sharing a kosher meal with the Greek king symbolizes both the storytellers' commitment to preserving their Jewish distinctiveness and the acceptance within Hellenistic society to which these storytellers nonetheless aspire. At the same time, Jews in Jerusalem and the surrounding region of Judea began telling stories about heroes who not only keep kosher but also abstain from all food prepared by non-Jews. The prophet Daniel, for example, refuses to eat food provided to him by a gentile king, even though earlier biblical figures ate such food. In another tale, Judith's refusal to eat food prepared by gentiles enables her to save the Jewish people from certain destruction. "Separate from the gentiles, and do not eat with them," Abraham warns Jacob in Jubilees 22:16, expressing a norm that would have been unrecognizable to the authors of Genesis. Jewishness, according to these Judean authors, entails self-segregation from gentiles.

For Jews in the Hellenistic world, keeping kosher was not just about the ingredients of one's food but also about who prepares it and who shares it. These food practices preserve a distinctive Jewish identity by marking the difference between Jews and their gentile neighbors. It is no

coincidence that this development in the function of Jewish food norms occurs during the Hellenistic era, when members of minority groups could literally become Greeks through a process of enculturation that included the adoption of Hellenistic food practices.

Rabbinic Judaism, the variety of Judaism that has been dominant for roughly the past fifteen hundred years, emerged in Judea during the first centuries of the Common Era; it revolves around the related texts of the Mishnah, compiled circa 200 CE, and the Talmud, whose Babylonian version was more or less complete by the year 600. As Judean (rather than Alexandrian) Jews, the rabbis who contributed to the Mishnah took for granted their community's norms forbidding food prepared by gentiles. As scholars obsessed with categories and principles, rabbis of the second through the sixth centuries transformed these norms into a laundry list of specific rules, all grounded in notions of what it means to be Jewish (see chapter 2 for further details). Some of these rules, like the prohibition against eating finely minced fish prepared by gentiles, address the fact that gentiles might use nonkosher ingredients: We, as Jews, follow the Torah's commandments; They, the gentiles, do not. Other rules, like the prohibition against drinking wine made or even touched by gentiles, reflect concern that gentiles regularly offer idolatrous wine libations: We worship the one true God while They are all polytheists.

In addition, rabbinic law prohibits eating bread baked by gentiles, cheese made by gentiles, the meat of animals slaughtered by gentiles, and foods cooked by gentiles. The common denominator in rules of this nature is that these foods are all transformed during their preparation process. Bread, after all, does not grow on trees; similarly, it takes a butcher to turn a cow into beef. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously linked the oppositional terms "raw" and "cooked" with "natural" and "cultural."[3] The rabbis did the same thing when discussing gentile chefs: foods cooked by non-Jews bear indelible traces of non-Jewish culture. By insisting that only Jews may properly perform butchery, baking, cooking, and similar acts of food preparation, the Mishnah and the Talmud teach that Jewishness constitutes the ideal human culture and that Jews should remain aloof from gentile cultures. This is why the rabbi we left in our imaginary cafeteria would be ordering a salad for lunch rather than a cooked vegetarian entrée.

Some Talmudic rabbis clearly believed that following these rules about gentile food would prevent Jews from socializing with or, even worse, marrying their gentile neighbors. Other rabbis, however, were perfectly comfortable with the prospect of food-related interaction between Jews and gentiles within the constraints previously described. These rabbis, unlike their segregationist colleagues, seem to feel that the very act of taking precautions when eating with gentiles is sufficient to reinforce a distinctive Jewish identity and prevent undue intimacy. Just as Israelites who choose kosher meat are reminded that God has chosen them, rabbinic Jews who are careful with the food of gentiles remember that God has distinguished Israel from the nations. The difference between Jews and non-Jews matters regardless of how these rabbis define Jewishness, and in one way or another, food reinforces that distinction.

In some respects, the rabbinic approach to conceptualizing Jewishness is commonplace. Humans often divide the world into Us and Them and regard their own community as special. While the rabbis employed a simple binary distinction, however, Christian and Islamic authorities developed more complex ways of classifying foreigners. These added complexities, often expressed through rules about food, reflect the importance that Christians and Muslims continued to ascribe to Jewishness even as they distinguished themselves from the Jews.

In sharp contrast with later Christians, Jesus and his first followers observed Judean norms about food. Not only did Jesus keep kosher; he refused to eat with gentiles and, in one incident, compares gentiles to dogs unfit to sit at the table of God's Jewish children (Mark 7:27–28; cf. Matthew 15:26–27). Many of his followers, however, believed that Jesus's death and resurrection signaled the beginning of a new era in which Jews and gentiles alike could attain salvation through faith in Christ. Paul, among others, declared that Greeks could join the church without first committing themselves to Jewish practices like circumcision and keeping kosher. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul also insisted that Jews and Greeks should participate as equals in the shared meals that defined the early Christian community (2:11–14). In fact, the very act of eating together established Christianity as a religion that supersedes the particular identities of Jews and Greeks. By eating with all fellow believers, Christians affirmed the notion that Jewishness is no longer an especially significant characteristic. Over time, however, Jewishness became quite significant to Christian identity—as a negative foil.

For several centuries after Jesus's death, Christian food practices served not only to bridge the gap between believers of different ethnic backgrounds but also to distinguish those Christians from both Jews and Greeks. Unlike Jews, Christians rejected biblical food restrictions: They, the Jews, follow the Old Testament literally by abstaining from the meat of certain animals, while We, the Christians, understand the text in its spiritual sense and therefore eat meat without distinction. Christians interpreted the Torah's laws as allegorical lessons in morality, insisting that God never wanted anyone to actually abstain from pork—God's true message is simply that humans should not act like pigs. (Alexandrian Jews, in contrast, believed that God forbade not only acting like pigs but eating them too.) Christians did not, however, eat all kinds of meat: unlike Greeks, Christians refused to eat food offered to idols. Abstention from such food and, with it, the affirmation of monotheism were such important parts of early Christian identity that when Roman emperors required their subjects to offer sacrifices, many Christians chose to become martyrs rather than comply. With the Christianization of Rome, however, the distinction between Christians and Greeks quickly disappeared.

The distinction between Christianity and Judaism persisted. After all, both Jews and Christians laid claim to the same God and the same biblical texts, yet Jews understood God and the Bible very differently from Christians. Not only that, Jews and Christians alike claimed to be the spiritual heirs of the biblical People of Israel, the uniquely holy nation. When holiness is defined in zero-sum terms, Judaism must be wrong for Christianity to be right. By ascribing negative characteristics to Jewishness, Christian authorities were able to reinforce the message that contemporary Jews had forfeited to Christians the unique relationship with God established in the Bible.

Leaders of the church defined Jews not merely as non-Christians but as anti-Christians, the polar opposite and eternal enemies of the truly holy people. Early medieval canon law (the law of the Church) expresses the notion that Jews not only fail to act in accord with Christian charity but actively seek to harm Christians. It suggests that Jews do not merely

engage in sex, ignoring the Christian ideal of celibacy; they seek illicit sex with unwitting nuns. Pagans simply lack knowledge of Christ, but Jews stubbornly spurn such knowledge even after their nominal conversion to Christianity.[4]

On the flip side of the same coin, Christian authorities defined themselves as anti-Jews, and they used rules about food to express this self-definition. Even though Christians may eat all food regardless of the prohibitions found in the Torah, from the fourth century into modern times, they were not allowed to eat food prepared by Jews or to share meals with Jews. One finds, for example, the following pair of late antique laws in Gratian's highly influential twelfth-century compilation: "No one of priestly rank, nor any layperson, may eat the unleavened bread of the Jews" and "All clerics and laity should henceforth avoid the meals of Jews, nor should anyone receive them at a meal" (Decretum C. 28 q. 1 cc. 14–15). These laws remained on the books until the early twentieth century, and several modern popes reiterated them. An oft-cited edict by Pope Pius VI (1775), for example, declares that "the Jews may not eat, nor drink, or have any other familiarity or conversation with Christians, nor Christians with Jews."[5]

Prohibitions against shared meals reflect concern that Jews, like Christian heretics, will lead the faithful astray through their false interpretations of the Bible and God's will. Prohibitions of food prepared by Jews, meanwhile, compare that food unfavorably to meat offered to idols. Church leaders offered especially harsh polemics against Passover matzah, which they portrayed as the diabolical inverse of the communion wafer consecrated during Mass.

The rhetoric associated with Jewish food paints a picture of Jews as both pagans and heretics: the ultimate outsiders and insiders gone horribly bad, all rolled into one terrifying image of everything Christianity condemns. By forbidding foods tainted by Jewishness, Christian authorities sought to protect their followers from succumbing to "Jewish" characteristics: just as humans should not act like pigs, Christians should not act like Jews and, as a precautionary measure, should not eat "Jewish" foods either. This is why the priest in our imaginary cafeteria would refuse food prepared by Jewish cooks and insist on eating at a separate table from the rabbi.

The Sunni imam, in contrast, would happily eat with the rabbi (or the priest), sharing any food prepared in accordance with Jewish norms (although Christian norms are more problematic). After all, the Qur'an declares with reference to Jews and Christians that "the food of those who were given the Book is permitted to you" (5:5). The Qur'an portrays the Bible as an authentic divine revelation and recognizes Judaism and Christianity as legitimate even as it describes Islam itself as the latest and greatest of the three Abrahamic religions. Islamic law makes manifest the inferiority of non-Muslims by imposing special taxes and a variety of discriminatory regulations. (Medieval Christian rulers imposed the same kinds of regulations on their own religious minorities as well.) Sunni authorities, however, symbolically elevate Judaism and Christianity over other non-Islamic religions by declaring that Muslims may eat meat prepared by Jews and Christians.

Sunni Islam has always been the numerically and politically dominant of Islam's two major branches. Medieval Sunni authorities highlight the permissibility of Jewish and Christian food as a means of emphasizing the fact that all recipients of God's revelations are alike in fundamental respects. Sunni Islam teaches that popular consensus is a source of authoritative information about God's will, and the legitimacy granted to Judaism and Christianity serves to enlarge the circle of those who agree on certain core principles of Islam. By asserting that even Jews and Christians have access to knowledge of God's will, Sunnis also bolster their claim that all Muslims have access to such knowledge. This claim is key to Sunni arguments against proponents of Shi'i Islam: because most Muslims are Sunnis, their consensus opinion demonstrates that Sunni Islam must be right. Notice that Sunnis use rhetoric about Jewishness and Jewish food to advance Sunni claims in an internal Islamic dispute to which Jews themselves are mere bystanders.

Shi'i authorities also used food practices and rhetoric about Jews (and Christians) in order to advance a particular way of viewing Islam. Unlike their Sunni counterparts, whose permission of Jewish food affirms the similarities between Judaism and Islam, medieval Shi'is stressed the differences between Islam and its predecessors. Attacking the symbolically significant permission of Jewish and Christian food, Shi'i authorities declare that Jewish and Christian butchers are incapable of properly

invoking God when slaughtering animals because of their incorrect theologies. Shiʿis also assert that all non-Muslims are impure and transmit impurity through contact. That is why the Shiʿi in our imaginary cafeteria would insist on an undressed salad—raw, dry vegetables cannot become impure—and would avoid sitting next to non-Muslims.

Shiʿis criticized Sunnis for their willingness to eat the food of Jews and Christians, pointing to this practice as proof that Sunnis fail to understand God's will and are not in fact good Muslims. This critique reflects the Shiʿi belief that true knowledge of God is not accessible to all Muslims, let alone to non-Muslims like the Jews. Rather, such knowledge comes only through the teachings of Muhammad's descendants, the Shiʿi imams. Shiʿis used rhetoric about Jews to disparage Sunnis much as House Republicans used rhetoric about the French to disparage Democrats who, like the French government, were reluctant to support the Iraq War. By implication, french-fry-eating Democrats do not value freedom and are not truly American. French citizens were not the primary target of Republican opposition to french fries, and similarly the Jews were not the primary target of Shiʿi condemnations of Jewish food. Jews and their food were simply caught in the cross fire of an internal Islamic dispute over whether Muslims ought to respect or disparage Jewishness.

Why did Shiʿis, Sunnis, and Christians alike devote so much attention to the Jewishness of their food, whether to avoid it or, in the case of the Sunnis, to embrace it? Because, to draw on another famous notion of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jewish food—and, more broadly, Jewishness itself—is "good to think with" regardless of whether it is also good to eat.[6] On this, the rabbis who contributed to the Mishnah and the Talmud would wholeheartedly agree. Rules about food defined as "Jewish" offer a concrete means of addressing the abstract distinction between Jews and non-Jews. This distinction contributed to the self-identity espoused by those who spoke not only for Judaism but also for Christianity and Islam, albeit in very different ways.

The importance of rules about food as a means of distinguishing Jews from non-Jews is especially apparent in medieval rabbinic discussions about wine associated with gentiles. The Mishnah and Talmuds forbid Jews from drinking or even selling wine that non-Jews have touched out of concern that gentiles might have offered a portion of that wine as a sacrifice to their gods: Jews, after all, may not participate even indirectly in idolatrous worship. Medieval rabbis, however, were well aware that their Muslim and Christian neighbors did not offer wine libations. Even those Muslims who violated Islamic prohibitions against alcohol did not use it in their worship, and within Christianity, only ordained priests consecrated wine through performance of the Eucharist. Some medieval rabbis also recognized Islam—and, less frequently, Christianity—as a monotheistic religion. These authorities nevertheless bent over backward to preserve traditional prohibitions regarding gentile wine, even when doing so entailed significant economic and social costs. The newfound rationale that proved most enduring was that the prohibition of gentile wine, like that of various other foods prepared by non-Jews, is meant to prevent Jews from marrying gentiles. What mattered most to medieval rabbis, however, was not the rationale behind these prohibitions but rather their function as a marker of gentile otherness and Jewish distinctiveness. Monotheism may no longer set Jews apart from their neighbors, but food practices still do the trick.

Christian and Islamic authorities also defined their respective communities in part by means of reference to—and rejection of—Jewish food practices. Because God favors Us over Them, Christians and Muslims asserted, we are free to eat meat, which Jews refuse to consume. But how does this principle apply to "Jewish" meat that Jews regard as nonkosher? The process of creating kosher meat, after all, involves the creation of nonkosher meat as well: Jewish butchers might discover after properly slaughtering a permitted animal that its meat is in fact not kosher according to rabbinic law due to an internal defect, and the Torah itself forbids eating certain portions of the animal. May Christians or Muslims consume this perfectly edible meat? This question proved especially good to think with, and the heated debates that it provoked among medieval Christian and Sunni scholars offer valuable insights into how these authorities thought about the relationship between food and Jewishness.

The most striking aspect of these internal debates among Muslims on the one hand and Christians on the other is that the participants all define Jewishness in terms of Islamic or Christian—rather than Jewish—sources. Sunnis uniformly hold Jewish meat to standards derived from the Qurʾan rather than the Torah or rabbinic tradition.

They merely disagree over whether the Qur'an authorizes Jews to obey pre-Islamic dietary laws, whether it imposes on contemporary Jews only Islam's more lenient norms, or whether it assigns harsher food restrictions to Jews in punishment for the Jews' refusal to embrace Islam. Similarly, Christians who engage this question draw entirely on Roman law and canon law to determine the Jewishness of meat from animals that Jewish butchers slaughter, taking for granted that Christians must avoid everything "Jewish." None of the participants in these debates bothered to ask the opinion of Jewish butchers or rabbis: they regarded the definition of Jewish food, and of Jewishness itself, as being too important to be left to Jews. This definition, after all, relates directly to the ways in which these authorities understood their own religious identity: Christianity is anti-Jewish, while (according to Sunnis) Islam is similar to Judaism but only to a limited degree.

House Republicans likewise did not bother to ask the opinions of Democrats or the French regarding the nature of "french fries" before changing the labels in the congressional cafeteria. The relationship of fries to freedom, after all, rested on rhetoric, not on anything intrinsic to either the potatoes or the principle of liberty. The same is true with respect to the Jewishness of food. Jews, Christians, and Muslims defined a wide variety of foods as "Jewish" or "not Jewish" for a wide variety of reasons, including some rationales that evolved over time. The act of ascribing Jewishness to food serves to define both the food and the meaning of Jewishness. Perhaps more important, that act also serves to differentiate Jews from non-Jews, much as the insistence on eating "freedom fries" marked supporters of the Iraq War as distinct from other Americans. Food is merely a useful medium for conveying the distinction between Us and Them.

Today, it is not unusual for rabbis, priests, and imams to share meals together. They may all make a point of eating food that is both kosher and halal, or they may ignore traditional dietary laws entirely, or they may order different items on the menu. Christian attitudes toward Jewishness have changed radically: most denominations now firmly reject the notion that Judaism is anti-Christian and that Christians must therefore be anti-Jewish. Islamic attitudes toward Jewishness have evolved as well. As for contemporary Jewish attitudes toward Jewishness, the chapters in this volume provide a small taste of their diversity. Food

practices, after all, continue to mark Jews as Jewish, whatever "Jewishness" may mean.

NOTES

1. This chapter summarizes, albeit with a somewhat different emphasis, arguments made in Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food*. I have therefore kept citations to a bare minimum. The chapter originated as a lecture that I delivered over several years at various universities and synagogues, and I am grateful for the feedback that I received in these venues. Several Colby College students—Kristin Esdale, Skylar Labbe, Sarah Jeanne Shimer, Sarah Shoer, and Anna Spencer—offered valuable comments on preliminary drafts of this work.
2. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 724.
3. Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and the Cooked*.
4. See further Freidenreich, "Jews, Pagans, and Heretics." On the use of negative ideas about Jews as a means of self-definition more broadly, see Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*.
5. Translated in Kertzer, *Popes and the Jews*, 29.
6. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*.

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